

Virtue and beyond in Plato and Aristotle

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1.

It is well known that at the end of the *Nicomachean Ethics* (*NE*) Aristotle, unexpectedly and perhaps without having sufficiently prepared his readers, switches to proposing the famous theoretical ideal of human happiness (*eudaimonia*). This apparently last-minute development concludes a lengthy investigation closely framed, so it may well have seemed, by two assumptions: first, that the major ingredient in happiness is virtuous activity; and second, that the virtue in question is to be understood as a set of dispositions for responding with appropriate feelings and conduct to the concrete situations in which human beings are situated. Roughly speaking, in other words, the virtue in question, the exercise of which has been presented as so crucial for human happiness, is a set of practical excellences. But now, in the penultimate chapters of the *NE*, we are suddenly given to understand that the happiness associated with this sort of virtue belongs at best to the second rank, whereas happiness in its highest form is found only in the godlike activity of an utterly different sort of virtue, that of purely theoretical wisdom (*sophia*).

Here I shall be discussing a different last-minute ethical turn by Aristotle. It occurs near the end of the *Eudemian Ethics* (*EE*). Less scandalous because less well known than its *Nicomachean* counterpart, the *Eudemian* late twist is almost as surprising. In the *EE* too Aristotle has been overwhelmingly concerned with practical virtue in its different kinds. Moreover, his *Eudemian* account of happiness, the highest human good, has been couched in terms of practical virtue.¹ Everything until just before the end suggests that in the *EE* Aristotle unambiguously regards the person of virtue as the very best sort of human being. But in the last chapter we find him demoting virtue. We are suddenly shown a sort of character superior to the virtuous or merely good (*agathoi*). Beyond them, we are told, are persons of noble or refined goodness, the *kaloik'agathoi* (literally, fine-and-good).² Simple or mere goodness is a necessary condition for refined goodness but is not sufficient. In fact Aristotle speaks of the refined grade as complete or perfect

(*teleios*) virtue,³ and implies in his preamble to the discussion that it is a sort of whole that contains the ordinary virtues.⁴ But it is not just the entirety of the ordinary virtues, nor is it a whole that supervenes on them. For it is clearly part of his view that people can have mere goodness or virtue without attaining the refined grade. The latter, then, does not automatically arise in the presence of the former.⁵

It soon becomes clear that the difference between virtue and refinement of virtue is not of degree. Not that Aristotle's account rules out differences in degree of virtue: on the contrary, he recognizes the possibility of a heroic or superhuman grade that stands up to circumstances so testing that even the truly good person gives way in them.⁶ But (as we shall see) the difference between mere and refined virtue is not of this nature. In fact, Aristotle here gives the impression of holding that refinement of goodness is a practicable ideal for all citizens, but not (in his remarks elsewhere about superhuman virtue) that all should ideally be superhumanly virtuous. Nor does Aristotle think that having refined virtue is or involves having just another good quality in addition to the familiar ones of courage, moderation, gentleness, justice, and practical wisdom. For his view is that these latter qualities—the ordinary virtues, if we may call them that for the moment—all have to hang together. We don't have any one of them strictly speaking if we lack practical wisdom (*phronêsis*), and we don't have practical wisdom without having all of them.⁷ Thus having any one of them entails having each of the others. This doctrine of the concatenation (rather than strict unity) of the virtues is not easy to understand or defend. But that need not trouble us here. What matters now is that, given the doctrine, what refined goodness adds to mere goodness cannot be just another ordinary virtue, a missing portion of mere goodness. All the portions of mere goodness must occur together, whereas Aristotle is clear that refined goodness need not exist when the rest of virtue exists.

Well, what is refined goodness, or refinement of goodness, according to Aristotle? He says: consider the Spartans. They—"or other people of that kind"—think of virtue as something one must have. And they are virtuous ("good men," 1249a1).⁸ But they are not *noble*-and-good, for they value virtue in the wrong way. They value it for the sake of the various desirable things it brings in its train: Aristotle calls these "the natural goods." Examples are honor, wealth, health and strength of body, power or social position. By contrast, persons of refined goodness value virtue and the practice of virtue for their own sake and because virtue and the practice of it are in themselves fine. Obviously Aristotle thinks this the right way to value virtue, and I shall not dispute that view.⁹

So we have a distinction between virtuous people with the wrong view about the value of virtue, and virtuous people with

the right view on this. Aristotle does not tell us what he thinks about virtuous people with no view one way or another on the reason why virtue is valuable, even though such people surely exist. People of this kind not only are virtuous but, unlike the Spartan type, they have nothing at all awry with them as far as virtue is concerned. Even so, it is clear, I think, that Aristotle would not include them among the *kaloik'agathoi*. Refinement of goodness necessarily involves the right reflective evaluation of goodness.

Aristotle's depreciation of the Spartan type may tempt one to infer that we are not meant to view this type as genuinely virtuous.¹⁰ I think we must resist this temptation. Aristotle is writing deliberately here. Had he wished, he could easily have said that the Spartan type seems to be virtuous but really is not. That is how Aristotle deals with a number of syndromes that mimic the conduct and disposition of the specific virtue courage: they are illusory forms, not the real thing.¹¹ But in the present passage he says rather emphatically that those of the Spartan type *are* good or virtuous men.¹² According to him they not only think one ought to or should have virtue, but they have it. And he says something else very significant proving that he means it seriously when he calls them good. Aristotle has just declared in general terms that the man who is good, even if not also refinedly good, is the source of goodness for any natural goods he has, such as wealth, prestige, and power. Here Aristotle takes up a tradition we find prefigured in Plato, according to which many of the things that human beings regard as good and desirable are really good and desirable only in the hands of the good person. Only such a one is genuinely advantaged by having them. Kant says something similar at the beginning of the *Groundwork*: the good will is the one unconditional good that is the condition of all other goods being good. The good will, or in Aristotle the good person, is like the Platonic Form of the Good: by participating in him, that is, by being related in some way to him, by belonging to him, the nonmoral goods, which in themselves are as it were only potentially good, take on actual value. Thus the good person is the *archê* and *aitia tôn agathôn*.¹³ Now whatever we make of this doctrine—and I shall not go into it here—it is surely the kind of thought one doesn't fling about lightly. Yet precisely it is what we find Aristotle asserting in our present passage concerning the Spartan type who is merely, but not refinedly, good: *by* such persons' goodness, or one might say in the ambit of their goodness, the nonmoral or natural goods are good.¹⁴ This seems to me to be very strong evidence that Aristotle means it literally and seriously when, in this passage, he calls the Spartan type good or virtuous—even at the very moment when he goes on to explain that these persons lack refinement through wrongly valuing virtue on account of the natural goods rather

than them on account of it.¹⁵ And if, as I think, he means it when he calls the Spartan type virtuous, then he must see this type as manifesting virtue in particular responses of the right kind: thus it cannot be the case that the Spartan type acts only with a view to obtaining the natural goods, since being thus motivated across the board is not consistent with being a genuinely virtuous person.

This Aristotelian exegesis suggests at least two questions for philosophical ethics. Both presuppose the idea of an agent who is genuinely virtuous but has the wrong view about the value of virtue: specifically, the view that it is for the sake of the natural goods. Firstly: what must virtue essentially be, if such an agent is possible? (Much of what I shall say on this is equally applicable to the agent who has virtue but is without any theory at all on why virtue is valuable.) Secondly: why, or in what way, does it matter whether we have the right view about the value of virtue? Why is refinement of goodness, as Aristotle depicts it, better than mere goodness? I shall come to these questions presently.¹⁶ But first I must say something about Plato, if only because I was rash enough to include him in my title.

2.

Plato also, in a passage not greatly frequented by contemporary philosophers,¹⁷ suggests that one can be genuinely virtuous but in a way far from ideal. This passage too occurs at the end of a great work on ethics: it is in the myth of Er.¹⁸ Here we are shown how the souls of the dead fare beyond this life and how they come to be reincarnated. They go first to benign places in the other world or to places of punishment, depending on how they have lived their natural lives. There they remain for a thousand years. Then, by stages, they arrive at the Spindle of Necessity (or Fate), where each soul is given to choose its own next life in this world. The choices are irrevocable, and are necessarily implemented. The power of divine justice does what it can¹⁹ to ensure that every soul understands what is about to happen: that not chance or external fate, but the soul itself alone, will determine which life it is about to get. The souls then choose in an order determined by lot. There are many more potential lives of all kinds on offer than there are souls, so even those far down in the queue have real options when their turn comes. Anyway, according to Er (who witnessed this process on one occasion), the soul who had drawn first choice came forward and without more ado selected the life of the greatest despot. Then and only then did this soul discover—lurking in the folds of the life it had acquired without thorough inspection—episodes of paradigmatic horror such as the devouring of his own children. And when this soul saw properly what it had chosen, it was aghast and bewailed its misfortune, although this was no one's fault but its own.

For our purpose the central point is that this very soul is described as having been virtuous in its previous life. (Hence it had gone to a benign place when it died. It could not be sent to the place of punishment, for it had done nothing wrong.²⁰) This soul, Plato says, had lived in a well-ordered city and had participated in virtue out of custom or habit, but without philosophy (*ethei aneu philosophias aretês meteilêphota*).²¹ And in the story this soul was not an anomaly: many others like it, we are told, made the same kind of disastrous choice. The moral is, of course, that sound philosophy in this world offers the best protection against such frightful dénouements in the other one.²²

But in order to grasp how that moral actually follows, we have to understand why the soul's previous virtue was not itself enough to keep it from making the ghastly choice; otherwise Plato sounds here as if he is simply bullying us into supporting philosophy by threats about reincarnation. The myth of Er speaks of the *taxis*, the arrangement, which a soul acquires only in the course of living its chosen life, different such arrangements forming in different souls as each makes itself at home in one or another kind of chosen life in the course of living it.²³ I rather think these on-the-job generated psychic arrangements are what Aristotle in his *Ethics* refers to as *hexeis* of the soul; that is, they are moral dispositions developed and activated in daily living. And the previous virtue of the soul at the center of this part of Er's story was the psychic *taxis* it had acquired in its previous life. We can imagine that this possession would atrophy in the other world, on the Aristotelian ground that it has to be exercised in order to be maintained.²⁴ The assumption then is that it cannot be exercised there; but why not? It might in fact be more satisfactory to imagine it failing to survive into the other world for the same reason almost every other this-worldly possession fails to survive, namely because it would be of no use—in fact, would be meaningless—I nearly said “under the other-worldly circumstances.” The point is that there are *no circumstances* There. I am supposing that Plato employs here what is familiar to us as the Aristotelian idea of a virtue as a disposition to respond appropriately to one's particular circumstances, that is, from within a pre-existing context made up of many factors constraining one's response, and many that direct and shape it. Such dispositions do not necessarily carry with them the habit of critical reflection about one's whole way of going on: the conditions of it, the standards and values it embodies, the changes that might imperil or strengthen it. People, even whole communities, may, if things remain orderly and peaceful, continue in the daily practice of virtue without stepping back from their lives. Their souls respond always to this occasion or that within an unremarked framework. But then upon going to the other world, the world of context-less choice, such souls arrive where their old ways of choosing have

nothing at all to latch on to, and where the one choice that *will* be upon them finds them quite unprepared.

But this is not quite true. Some ground must have been laid. For even granted that it could not “take its virtue with it,” how could a *previously* virtuous soul so precipitately choose, between lives, the life of the greatest despot? It is not to be supposed that this soul’s interest in despotism sprang up in the after-world out of nothing. There must have been a history to this predilection—a history in its previous life. But what sort of interest in being a despot could it have entertained then? Not a practical or even a would-be-practical interest. Any soul which in this world took practical aim on tyrannical power would not be virtuous. Criminal acts must be plotted with a view to seizing power, and perpetrated if the bid is to be successful. Hence the desire for despotism harbored by the soul in the story must have been impractical in nature: it must have consisted in the play of fantasy-fascination whose object the soul at the time knew to be morally and practically out of reach and out of the question, and therefore safely and innocently, so it thought, allowed itself to be charmed by. What kept the fantasy-object out of the field of practical option were the soul’s this-worldly circumstances and the natural capacities of things, including human beings. Only because of these is there a difference between practical desire and fantasy desire, with the result that in order to get something in this world one has to do more than be entranced by it. But in the next world, where no impediments surround us, what had been a fantasy becomes an automatically self-fulfilling choice.²⁵

However, the soul in the other world must have retained rudiments of normal, pre-philosophical, human decency. (On the basis of these, presumably, custom and practice in its previous life had built the psychic *taxis* of practical virtue.) For certainly philosophy was not needed to make the soul in the other world hate monstrously foul actions: once it saw some of the implications of its despotic choice, it broke into spontaneous lamentation. It railed against chance and external fate, not understanding how its own fantasy had set the trap. Its life in this world enabled it to indulge an admiration for despotism from a state of ethical security, and so it engaged in the non-responsible imagining that deepens such spells. It focused on the attractive things about despotism without reading the small print, precisely because the whole package was, in this world, out of reach. It blindly assumed that the context, inner and outer, that made it currently safe to fantasize, would necessarily always be there. Meanwhile, the course and content of the fantasizing was unresponsive to the soul’s actual particular circumstances. The fantasy-object was “not in the same world” with them. Its content ran free of this-worldly constraints. This self-containedness is, I am supposing, exactly the property the

fantasy needed to enable it to cling on in the soul, remaining there as an active influence even in the other world where no “circumstances” were present to hold it in check.²⁶

How would philosophy have helped protect it from such a disastrous between-lives choice? But first we should ask: whose philosophizing? Perhaps it did not have to be this soul’s own.²⁷ Enough, perhaps, if it had been reared through a reflectively designed education like that of the auxiliary guardians, who are brought up not merely to value justice for its own sake, but positively to love it and regard any deviation from it—not merely monstrous ones—as ugly, and in short to look upon justice as the essence of *eudaimonia*; and to be so deeply dyed with this attitude that “even such extremely effective detergents as pleasure, pain, fear, and desire wouldn’t wash it out.”²⁸ In any case, etymology allows that I can have *philosophia* without personally philosophizing, if there are those who do and I love and respect their authority.

However, a certain amount of personal philosophizing would come as a natural bloom on the auxiliary’s upbringing if philosophizing is allowed to include thoughtful albeit nontechnical general reflection on common experience, yielding conclusions such as that it is hard or impossible for a despot not to commit disgraceful crimes;²⁹ that a life of moderate resources is most favorable to practices of virtue;³⁰ that making good choices depends on more than meaning well. (For of course the soul in the story did *mean* well when between lives it chose despotism. And even within this life Plato’s audience would have been aware of plenty of cases where one thing had so led to another that individuals who started out remarkably well ended as traitors and murderers.³¹) What is more, even without an ideal auxiliary’s education, if the soul in the story had practiced self-examination in this life it might have realized before too late that being innocent of wickedness mattered to it much more than it was aware of in its thoughtlessness; thus the soul might have become in this life more vigilant about its care and perhaps less indulgent in fantasy. Commonsense philosophizing could also have led it to suspect the extent to which run of the mill virtue and good conduct, including its own, depend on a carapace of habits and institutions; and to realize that the conditions for these can be swept away. Finally, Platonic eschatology would have taught it that none of us escapes just such a catastrophe no matter how placidly we fare from birth to death; for death simply strips the soul of those worldly support systems, in which condition it then has to face the most momentous choice conceivable.

But these lessons of philosophy could not help in that choice unless they were still present and working in the soul; and why should we suppose this to be true of them when even the virtuous *psuchês taxis* is null and void in the other world? To make

sense of this, we have to think of philosophy as, in a way, a sister activity to fantasy. In this life philosophizing too depends, for the safety of the activity, on a given set of circumstances, while in its deliberate universality it takes no notice of these or any other particular circumstances. Like fantasy, it follows an inner dynamic, being similarly free from the constraints of this world. Hence if the fruits of one thereby survive in the soul after death, so do the fruits of the other.³²

But can we find a moral in the myth of Er if we are non-believers in the Platonic eschatology? Yes, surely it proclaims that even if individual souls do not literally determine from scratch the conditions of their lives, and even if each soul naturally disposes itself into a *taxis* reflecting its life-conditions, all the same we are not inevitably limited to acquiescing in those conditions, so that all of us is immersed in the business of living along in them, except for a corner or two of refreshing fantasy. Once the soul learns (by doing so) that already in the midst of this world it can get its chin above the edge, its power is freed to question and work towards changing even fundamentals of its life. For nothing can keep it back but its own unawareness that it has this power.

I shall return very briefly to the myth of Er after a further look at Aristotle. Here, then, is what we have seen so far: Plato and Aristotle, at the end of the *Republic* and the *Eudemian Ethics* respectively, see ethical virtue as possibly coexisting with a sort of ethical fault. In each case it is a fault that stands at some remove from daily practicalities, and on this level may hardly show up, or hardly show up as a fault. With Aristotle the fault is reflective subordination of virtue to the natural goods. With Plato, it is taking virtue for granted and (I suggested) letting false fantasies of *eudaimonia* install themselves in the place of philosophy.³³

3.

I now come back to Aristotle's view, although, as was indicated earlier,³⁴ the purpose now is not further exegesis but to raise two philosophical questions. The first was: what must virtue essentially be, if it is possible genuinely to possess it while valuing it for the wrong reason, like Aristotle's Spartan type? Answering this is straightforward, I think, but along with doing so I want to fend off a view which, if true, would mean it is impossible to be genuinely virtuous without having the right evaluative attitude to virtue. My argument will follow familiar tracks, yet the mistake I shall target still has life in it, since it shows up quite often in discussions of Aristotle's ethics.

The first point to be made, however, is this: the natural answer to the question just posed is more or less what our discussion of Plato assumes, namely that virtue is a stable disposition or set of dispositions for evincing right or appro-

priate responses, in feeling and action, over a wide range of ordinary situations.³⁵ By “right or appropriate” I mean “right or appropriate all things considered,” and I shall assume that what we would call moral requirements outweigh or trump other considerations.³⁶ Moreover, the virtuous person comes up with the right or appropriate reaction as such. That is to say, variations in her or his reactions exactly reflect variations in what counts as the right or appropriate response in varying situations. (I make the simplifying assumption that there is just one appropriate response in each situation.) The virtuous person not only has the ethical know-how that tracks right response, but immediately enacts that know-how on the given occasion. “Immediately” means not temporal immediacy, but causal. Just knowing how to respond is sufficient for the response.³⁷

It seems obvious that if this is what virtue is, then one can be virtuous and reliably come up with the right practical and emotional responses to situations just because one is geared to do precisely that, even though when asked the reflective question “What is the point of virtue? What should we want virtue *for*?,” one issues a wrong answer. That this is possible is closely connected with the fact that one may have developed and practiced virtue over a long time before ever considering at all what exactly the point of it is. Probably this development and practice could not have occurred if one had not imbibed from others the belief that being a good or virtuous person is very important and must be taken very seriously. Thus it may well be that one could not possess, because one could not attain, virtue without having any evaluative attitude toward virtue at all. I am claiming, however, that any such necessary reflective attitude need not include a specification of *what* it is that makes virtue so important. Such specification may or may not come later, and it can take a correct (so I assume for now) form as when we end up holding that virtue is to be valued for its own sake and just because it is itself fine, or an incorrect form as when we end up holding that virtue is for the sake of the natural goods.³⁸ But even in the latter case, the strong set of habits in which virtue consists will keep us responding appropriately in particular situations. Sometimes, of course, the right response requires that we forgo a significant natural good—either we as individuals or the group to which we belong. However, if we really are virtuous we shall find such forgoing quite natural; we shall feel at home with such behavior. When we are rather austere about the natural goods on crucial occasions, we are then in a sense behaving as if we considered them less important than doing the right thing. That is: we are behaving in the same way as people would who held and lived by the latter second-order view. But this does not mean that we share or even waver toward that view. After all, we do not, in

those situations, have the option of pursuing the natural goods. Wrongdoing is not a practical option if we really are virtuous, if we really have that steady disposition.

If it seems a bit odd to these Spartan-style virtuous agents that they find themselves adhering to correct behavior even when easy paths, cutting moral corners, plainly stretch between them and some natural good—well, this tension can be resolved in different ways. They might end up rejecting after all their reflective theory of why virtue matters, and of turning to embrace the alternative one, which they now might see themselves as having implicitly held all along. “As I discovered late in the day, I had all along been courting her for love, when I thought I was doing it for her money.” Or they might hang on to their reflective theory, but insist against the evidence that cutting the moral corners always has damaging natural effects. Or they might find it compelling to believe that empirical appearances fall far short of reality and that you can never win by going wrong morally because doing so brings you inevitably far worse evil sent by god as punishment here or reserved for you after death. Those who believe such things are sometimes accused of doing what is right simply so as to avoid the evils of divine punishment. But the explanation may be the other way round. In some human beings the very belief in god’s commands and divine justice may be bolstered, even generated, by a strong antecedent attachment to right-doing combined with a rationale about the value of it that signally clashes with some of the empirical facts.

The question was what must virtue essentially be, if it can be genuinely possessed by those who value it for the wrong reason; and the simple answer we have been considering is that virtue is a firm disposition or set of dispositions to respond appropriately in a wide variety of typical human situations. I am not aware that this is the only logically possible answer. There may be richer or more complicated accounts of virtue that also allow the possibility of Aristotle’s virtuous Spartan type. However, the simple account is, as I have said, the natural one. If it is correct, then anyone is wrong who holds, as some philosophers are said by some interpreters to do, that the virtuous agent always acts from the thought “This is what the virtuous person so placed would do” or from the thought “To do this action is to act from virtue or virtuously.” This destroys the immediacy that is characteristic of the virtuous agent according to the natural account. On that account, one is not virtuous unless the mere recognition of the right thing to do is sufficient for the action. In recognizing the right thing one is attending to the particular external situation. Thoughts that one’s action matches, or is, a virtuous one, are additional, and they may actually distract from the situation.³⁹ In fact, if we construe the second thought so that it is tantamount to “I am acting from

virtue/virtuously," then, on the natural account of what virtue is, the thought is doomed to be false by being acted from.

I am not sure how many philosophers really themselves believe that the morally admirable agent acts from either of these superfluous thoughts. But for some reason we find philosophers reading this view into other philosophers, not least Aristotle. However, if Aristotle accepts the natural account of virtue—an account which makes neat sense of his "Spartan type"—then (to that extent⁴⁰) the superfluous thoughts are no part of Aristotle's picture of the virtuous agent in action.

I have not yet reached the precise mistake billed earlier while answering the first question. But here it now is. "The virtuous agent acts from the following conjunctive thought: (a) he himself is acting virtuously, and (b) acting virtuously is the greatest of all goods, or anyway the greatest humanly attainable." Here, the assumption that virtuous action is the greatest good is attributed to the virtuous agent for no other reason than to explain the reliability and categoricity of this agent's correct responses. The underlying philosophical thought is that the virtuous agent is motivated only by desire for her own good, and, consequently, only her own *greatest* good can be *guaranteed* (in a rational agent) to motivate and thereby reliably produce the appropriate behavior. This sort of view, like the ones above, more often gets ascribed to philosophers by other philosophers than clearly professed by any philosophers themselves. It tends to be ascribed to ancients such as Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle.⁴¹ But it too introduces superfluous and corrupting thoughts into virtuous agency. The virtuous agent, on the natural picture, does not need to be a virtue- or virtuous-action-worshipper (any more than she needs to be a rule- or rule-following-worshipper). On the natural picture the virtuous agent is immediately motivated by the particular requirements, as she sees them, of the external situation, and there is no room *in this motivation* for the conjunctive thought just mentioned. And that is just as well if we want Aristotle's Spartan type to be a coherent possibility. For the Spartan type is virtuous, yet holds virtue *not* to be the greatest of all goods, since his reflective view is that the natural goods are more precious than virtue and acting virtuously.⁴²

In the mistake with which I am concerned, the springs of the practical agent's virtuous conduct on any given occasion are supposed to include a general belief in the supreme goodness of his or her engaging in just such virtuous action (or a general desire for engaging in such action which represents it as the greatest good). That is to say that virtue essentially includes the possession of this belief or desire, together with the habit of being motivated by it. This account not only introduces an unpleasant self-reference into the heart of good agency, as well as making impossible Aristotle's Spartan type. It also makes a

fool either of itself or of Aristotle's final Nicomachean thesis, that a human being's most precious good is the good activity of theoretical reason. For if the general belief ascribed in the mistaken account is true (or the general desire correctly directed), then the final Nicomachean thesis is false. Thus each of the two Aristotelian *Ethics* gives us, near its end, a solid reason for not attributing to Aristotle the mistaken account of virtue. By contrast, on what I call the simple or natural account of virtue, Aristotle can consistently hold that virtuous practical activity is not the most precious thing that the human world can aspire to, while also holding that practical virtue is unreserved in its responses to particular situations. And he certainly need not hand the ultimate palm to practical virtuous activity in order to be consistent in rating it infinitely higher than the natural goods. Aristotle surely does not think the natural goods so important that nothing can be infinitely more precious than they unless it is supreme.

4.

The second question was: why does it matter whether we value virtue for the right reason? For if the answer given to the first question is correct, then valuing virtue for the right reason does not make the virtuous person a better doer, or a doer of better, actions on the ground. And if moral education worked only by example, a virtuous person with no views about the value of virtue would be an effective conduit. But in human life as well as deeds (*erga*) there are ideas communicated in discourse (*logoi*). The point then for Plato and Aristotle is that when false ideas of the essence of *eudaimonia* are on the market, ideas that exercise legitimate attraction in that each centers on something—power, prosperity, beauty, strength, good connections—which it is perfectly natural and reasonable for human beings to desire as *good*—then true and well-articulated reflection is needed to drive back those false ideas. The point is not that an individual in the grip of one of those false ideas cannot be genuinely virtuous in his life, but that his virtue is much less likely to propagate itself across the generations. His virtue is a set of habits which, where it really exists, operates independently of his ideology. But with a false ideology circulating and the moral establishment giving it their blessing, the young understandably find it simply irrational that their parents, when it comes to particular situations, balk at the moral corner-cutting glanced at earlier. Thus through changes of standards one generation's out-of-reach object of fantasy becomes another's practicable option or even ruling aim. Perhaps the myth of Er is intended in part to remind us of this possibility, whatever other truth we are also meant to find in it, so that the identical soul stands, in successive reincarnations, first for an innocent but philosophically foolish father, then for his ruthless

and hateful son.⁴³ The son's life spells out in concrete reality the father's "merely recreational" conception of *eudaimonia*. The content of the conception is transmitted across the generations as if it were a single soul living on from father to son. Between lives, that soul can see—prophetically too late—how the father by feeding his own life on fantasy will have devoured his children's chance of *eudaimonia* in theirs.⁴⁴

The right reflective attitude to virtue is required, then, not for possession of virtue by individuals, but for its inculcation in the next generation. So much, I take it, is common ground between our two philosophers. Aristotle, however, is surely also moved by a, for him, distinguishable concern. If practical virtue (for this is what we have been talking about) is to be pursued for the sake of the natural goods, which indeed the practice of it is apt to generate, what can the value possibly be of purely theoretical studies? They are not natural goods, nor apt in themselves to produce them. A coarse heteronomy in the practical sphere is thus naturally twinned with philistinism.

Notes

Thanks to Stephen Halliwell for valuable suggestions on the original paper and to participants at the Spindel conference and other meetings, but especially to Rachel Barney, for stimuli that should lead to future improvements on the thoughts presented here.

¹ *EE* II.1-3.

² *EE* VIII.3 (I am following the text of Walzer and Mingay [Oxford, 1991]). The whole chapter (with particular attention to its implications on Aristotle's evaluation of theoretical activity) is discussed in S. Broadie, *Ethics with Aristotle* (New York, 1991), 373–88.

³ 1249a16.

⁴ 1248b8-16, esp. 10. The language recalls 1220a2-4, but there *hê tês psuchês aretê hêi telos* is the entirety of virtue divided according to the "ethical" and intellectual parts of the soul. There seems no place for *kalok'agathia* in that division. It is never mentioned as an intellectual virtue, nor as an "ethical" one (e.g., it is not on the list of "ethical" virtues at 1220b38ff.). As for *aretên teleian* at 1219a39, the point there is so schematic as to apply to any whole of virtue, whether one made up of the standard "ethical" and intellectual members, or one made up of all the standard virtues plus *kalok'agathia*.

⁵ Thus when at 1248b10 he speaks of *kalok'agathia* as the virtue that is "from" (*ek*) the others, this cannot mean that they automatically give rise to it, but that *when* it exists it is a development out of them, or they are material for it.

⁶ See *NE* VII (= *EE* VI).1, 1145a18-30 (cf. 10, 1152a25-7), on predicating ethical qualities by a standard tailored to "most people's capacity." (With many scholars today, I place the origin of the three common books [*NE* V, VI, VII = *EE* IV, V, VI] with the *EE*.)

⁷ *NE* VI.13, 1144b30-1145a2.

⁸ The Spartans figure here as emblematic of a certain ethical type. In the *Politics* where Aristotle faults the actual Spartans for having the character sketched here, he is clearly not willing to call them virtuous or good *sans phrase* (II.9, 1271b1-11; VII.15, 1334a40-b5), but

that is how he speaks of the type here.

⁹ The fullest statement is at *Politics* VII.1, 1323a24-b21.

¹⁰ Thus Woods, who describes the Spartan type as merely “aspir[ing] to virtue.” According to him, this type’s good dispositions are “not virtues (in the full sense).” This must mean not that there is a virtue that such a person lacks, but that, e.g., such courage as he has is not all that courage should be. Woods’s reason for his interpretation is that an Aristotelian virtue in the full sense is a disposition to act “for the sake of the fine” (Michael Woods, *Aristotle Eudemian Ethics Books I, II, and VIII*, second edition [Oxford, 1992], 176). Woods, however, appears to conflate the virtuous agent (whose particular acts are done for the sake of the fine) with the one who values virtue just because it is fine, for he seems to think that the *EE* VIII.3 discussion of *kalok’agathia* is about the former (Woods, *Aristotle Eudemian Ethics Books I, II, and VIII*, 175; for an interpretation partly on similar lines see also Jennifer Whiting, “Self-love and Authoritative Virtue,” *Aristotle, Kant, and the Stoics*, ed. S. Engstrom and J. Whiting [Cambridge, 1996], 162–99, esp. 166–7). It is true that the text itself tends to support this conflation at 1248b34–7, 1249a5–6, and 1249a14–16. These passages seem to present the *kalosk’agathos* as *distinctively* carrying out his particular acts for the sake of the fine. For the moment (optimistically perhaps, but at least for the purpose of this paper), I assume that these are imprecise formulations, and that their meaning is that what the *kalosk’agathos* endorses as fine, and values for its own sake, is virtue or virtuous agency as a *whole way of being*. (Thus I take, for example, 1249a14–16 to be saying that the Spartan type adheres to a set of practices or patterns of behavior which are as a matter of fact fine, but justifies his adherence by pointing to their ulterior consequences.) The thought that the Spartan type of *EE* VIII.3 necessarily lacks “virtue in the full sense” seems to be driven by the idea that (A) the orientation toward the fine that, for Aristotle, governs particular manifestations of genuine virtue is identical with or necessarily reflected in (B) a correct second-order understanding of the value of virtue itself. But this is a disputable assumption. A main thesis of this paper is that A occurs without B in the mere (but genuine) *agathos*. (*Magna Moralia* II.9 muddles the distinction between mere *agathos* and *kalosk’agathos*.) On the meaning of “acting for the sake of the fine,” v.i. footnote 37.

¹¹ *EE* III.1, 1229a30: *kat’alêtheian oudemia toutôn*; cf. 25–6. The more elaborate treatment in *NE* III. 10 stresses many times over the merely “apparent” nature of the five likenesses of courage.

¹² *agathoi men andres eisi*, 1249a1, reminiscent of, e.g., Simonides’ *andr’agathon men alatheôs genesthai chalepon* (“A good man is something it is hard truly to become”).

¹³ *NE* I.12, 1102a3–4; *Pol.* VII. 13, 1332a21–23. Cf. Plato, *Euthydemus*, 280b1 ff. and *Meno*, 87e5 ff., where wisdom is the *archê tôn agathôn*; *Laus* II, 660e1 ff., where it is justice; see also Kant on the bonum supremum (*Critique of Practical Reason* 5:110). (I discuss this doctrine of the Good in “On the Idea of the *Summum Bonum*,” forthcoming in *Virtue, Norms, and Objectivity: Issues in Ancient and Modern Ethics*, ed. Christopher Gill [Oxford, 2005].)

¹⁴ 1249a1–2 in light of 1248b26–34, with Solomon’s supplement at 1249a1.

¹⁵ Thus Whiting (“Self-love and Authoritative Virtue,” 188; cf. 168)

is clearly right not to rest (in the end) much weight on any supposed parallel between the *EE* VIII.3 distinction, and the *NE* VI (*EE* V) distinction between *phusikê* and *kuria arête* (1144b1-16). *Phusikê arête* in the latter contrast is presented as a sort of natural good (in the sense of *EE* VIII.3) which may actually be harmful in the absence of *nous*; thus there is a world of difference between it and Spartan “mere” virtue of *EE* VIII.3. However, Whiting does assimilate the latter (called a *hexis politikê* at 1248b37-8) to the “political,” timocratic, form of apparent courage presented at *EE* III.1, 1229a13 and *NE* III.8, 1116a15-29. But this type’s fixation on honor and shame makes it importantly different from the Spartan type of *EE* VIII.3, since the latter’s ultimate values comprise the natural goods in general.

¹⁶ In sections 3 and 4 respectively.

¹⁷ An exception is M. F. Burnyeat in “Plato and the Dairymaids” (unpublished).

¹⁸ *Republic* X, 614–21.

¹⁹ From *Rep.* 619c2-6 we learn that the divine power is severely limited in this respect.

²⁰ Punishment would have been impossible not only because of divine justice (the soul had done nothing to deserve punishment), but (Plato may imply) because one great purpose of punishment is reform, where feasible; reform is linked to repentance; and repentance requires consciousness of wrongdoing. (This suggests an interesting addition to the *Gorgias* point that the *if* one commits injustice one should for one’s own sake seek out punishment [478d ff.]; the new thought is that it can be better to sin than to remain innocent without philosophy: i.e., better to put in train the events that will lead to punishment and purification.)

²¹ *Rep.* 619c7-d1. Some translations, e.g., Waterfield’s, fudge the statement that this soul had been virtuous, saying, e.g., that it had been virtuous to some extent; but no such qualification is obvious in the text. *arêtes meteilêphota* at d1 means “had got to be [= American “gotten”] virtuous” (or, pushing harder, “had got to be virtuous along with others”). Cf. *Parmenides* 130e5–131a6. (True, at *Rep.* 421c5 “get their share of happiness” is a natural translation, and in the context it certainly does not equate to full blooded “get to be happy,” but this is because the passage is about compromise: since the guardians have to concede to the needs of the whole, they will not be fully happy; but the implied “not fully” is based on the empirical facts of this case, not built into the meaning of *metalambanein* as generally used by Plato.)

²² I think it is clear that the myth is an argument for living philosophically: not, as e.g., Annas at moments has thought, an argument showing that it is good to be just (Julia Annas, *An Introduction to Plato’s Republic* [Oxford, 1981], 349–53). There is a remarkable difference from the much more optimistic picture of *Phaedo* 82a10-c8: there, the truly philosophical soul breaks out of the chain of human incarnation altogether, while “those who have practised popular and social [*dêmotikên kai politikên*] virtue, which they call moderation and justice and which was developed by habit and practice, without philosophy or understanding” [*ex ethous te kai meletês ... aneu philosophies te kai nou*] (tr. Grube) comfortably become first bees, wasps or ants, and then—next time round—decent human beings. The verbal echo makes it hard to believe that one passage (whichever) is not deliberately correcting the other.

²³ *Rep.* 618b 2-4.

²⁴ More than one discussant has pointed out that other-worldly rewarding and punishing of souls presupposes that they still retain (for a while) their virtuous or wicked psychic *taxeis*. However, the present exposition assumes only that these can no longer be active.

²⁵ Cf. *Rep.* IX, 571b4-c1 and 572b3-6; see also II, 360b3-c5, where Glaucon speaks for the view that, given the power of invisibility, which would make a person *en tois anthrôpois isotheon*, even the just man would not be so “adamantine” as to stand fast in his justice and hold back from wickedness. Cf. *Rep.* X. 618, e4, where the context shows that that the necessary adamant can come only from *philosophia*.

²⁶ The reasoning of the last sentence may seem fanciful, but this part of the myth of Er poses a problem to which one may hope Plato had an implicit solution. The soul loses, not only its body, but something psychic about itself (the activity of its previous *psuchês taxis*) when it goes to the other world; yet the story requires that there it also retains some kind of ethical bent. Hence it seems legitimate to ask about the difference between psychic characteristics shed, and those retained. It would be natural to think of the activity of the *psuchês taxis* as shed because it depends on existence in a body, but then the question arises why the same is not true of all psychic characteristics. The suggested answer is that some, to be active, require a *Lebenswelt* and some do not. (Thus, in the story, the activity of the *taxis psuchês* fails to survive natural death not because for some reason Plato is identifying it with or seeing it as supervenient on some condition of the body physiologically conceived, but because it is via bodily activity that we are social animals.)

²⁷ However, *Rep.* 618c1 (“each of us”) seems to speak to the contrary. But the reference of “us” is unclear. It may be as narrow as “us intellectuals.”

²⁸ *Rep.* IV, 429b ff.; cf. X, 618e 4–619a2.

²⁹ Cf. *Rep.* 618c6-e1.

³⁰ Cf. *Rep.* 619a5-b1.

³¹ Presumably one of the aims of the *Republic* is to make it intelligible that intelligent, gracious, young men with advantages second to none could *from themselves* come to ethical grief.

³² And perhaps this can apply too to philosophical beliefs which the soul had absorbed but not by its own philosophizing. However that may be, it seems that if a soul in this life is virtuous even if only “through habit and without philosophy,” it must have made the prenatal choice of a life favorable to virtue; for divine law says that we shall have virtue *only to the extent that we prize it* (617e 3-4). If the prizing, anyway at its strongest, is an articulate and philosophically based attitude, then the soul on which we have been focusing may well have been touched by philosophy in its last but one incarnation. If so, then it is an implication of the narrative that one might have enough philosophy in Life 1 to make a between-lives choice with an eye to virtue in Life 2, but not enough also to choose conditions that would favor *philosophy* as well in Life 2.

³³ The soul in Plato’s story might, in this life, have valued virtue for the sake of the natural goods (and Glaucon and Adimantus in *Republic* II suggest that there are plenty of such souls about); but this is not necessary. It might have valued virtue for its own sake, but not enough or not single-mindedly enough, or it might have had no views

on why virtue is valuable.

³⁴ End of section 1.

³⁵ On stability cf. Aristotle, *NE* II.4, 1105a33. "Ordinary," because we are not considering situations (in this life) where a good response demands superhuman virtue, nor supposed between-lives situations.

³⁶ This is not the assumption that moral *considerations* outweigh or trump all others. Even in the virtuous person the outweighing or trumping can go the other way when a moral consideration is minor and the contending concern major. But then the moral consideration is not a moral *requirement*.

³⁷ How on such a minimalist interpretation of Aristotelian ethical virtue do I account for his insistence that the virtuous agent acts "for the sake of the fine" (*tou kalou heneka*)? Answer: I assume that what Aristotle means by this above all is that the virtuous agent's particular responses reliably track what is in fact *kalon*, by reliably being *kala*. In short, this (with the appropriate counterfactuals built into "reliably") would be for him the truth-condition of "the virtuous agent acts for the sake of *to kalon* as such." Thus the virtuous agent need not be motivated by the distinct thought that "doing this is/would be *kalon* (or not doing it *aischron* [a judgment in the same dimension])," if being motivated by that distinct thought means anything more than what is implied by the reliable tracking just mentioned. Note that this interpretation has Aristotle treating ethical *kallos* as a real property of possible responses; but then we know already that he is happy with this. (It may be that—for some reason—a more heavily psychologized, or less behavioristic, notion of acting *tou kalou heneka* seems called for by theories that regard ethical *kallos* as nothing but the content of an attitude reliably exhibited by the virtuous agent. If so, then interpreters who are themselves philosophically more comfortable with this sort of anti-realism may be tempted to read Aristotle psychologically in this respect, so as to feel more comfortable with him.) Of course the virtuous agent is also normally able to explain—when asked—why *to kalon* demanded that he did such and such under the circumstances; also to explain that this was why he did it. In human beings this is part and parcel of the ability to track the *kalon*. But his ability to answer those questions does not entail that the action was motivated by the distinct thought of *to kalon*.

³⁸ This is not a silly mistake, given that virtue in society tends to promote the natural goods (as Aristotle recognizes at *Politics* II.9, 1271b7-10 and VII.1, 1323a41), and given how important they are to us, as shown by the extent to which most of us struggle for them. It is surely quite natural and borne out by experience to think that this other very important thing, virtue, matters because they do.

³⁹ When such thoughts do help one to act well, as is often the case, this (on the natural account) is a sign that one is still only semi-virtuous or that one is facing a highly demanding situation. V.s. note 6.

⁴⁰ The qualification is because Aristotle may have different views in different places.

⁴¹ Thus Prichard ("Does Moral Philosophy Rest on a Mistake?," *Moral Obligation* [Oxford, 1949], 1–17) sees Plato as trying to persuade us of the truth of (b) so that we should be more motivated to do particular right acts.

⁴² The virtuous agent may behave *as if* virtuous action is the greatest good (see above). But the possibility of the Spartan type

would prove that behaving thus does not entail being motivated in what one does by the distinct corresponding thought.

⁴³ The lesson here is different from that of the familial degenerations corresponding to the stages of political decline in *Rep.* VIII-IX. There, every effort was made to show the gradual character, hence the empirical naturalness and predictability, of the parallel processes. Here, where the transition is supernatural and over all at once, the emphasis is metaphysical and tragic.

⁴⁴ Whiting ("Self-love and Authoritative Virtue") makes the interesting suggestion that the seemingly haphazard sequence of topics in *EE* VIII (is ethical wisdom [*phronêsis*] *epistêmê*, as Socrates thought? [ch. 1], the role of luck in living well [ch. 2], and virtue as good-making [*inter alia* in ch. 3]), reflects the *Euthydemus*, 275a-282d. See too Rachel Barney (this volume) on the sequence of topics. It could also be the case that the focus in *EE* VIII on luck and then on the question of virtue without, and virtue with, correct thoughtful evaluation of virtue, reflects the myth of Er, of which these are two central themes. If Aristotle in the *EE* sees correct thoughtful evaluation of virtue as grounded in a sort of *philosophia*, then both he and Plato in the *Republic* can pay Socrates this tribute: Socrates was wrong if he thought that the day-to-day ethical wisdom of the virtuous was a science or *technê* involving only training of the intellect, but right in holding that human virtue and happiness are very insecure without *philosophia*.